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Assessing sustainability of employee suggestion schemes: Cases from the United Arab Emirates

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Employee Suggestion Scheme Sustainability Excellence Model: Cases from United Arab Emirates

Abstract

This paper presents a sustainability excellence framework developed based on cases in the United Arab Emirates. The five factors are presented for assessing the sustainability of the suggestion system including Leadership and Work Environment, System Capability, System Effectiveness, Organizational Encouragement and System Barriers. It suggests that sustainability of a suggestion system can be understood as a three stage model comprising the stages: the initial stage, developmental stage and the advanced stage. Then the model discussed the key practices associated for each of these stages. Finally the implications for Organizational Learning are provided.

Key words: Suggestion schemes, Sustainability, Organizational Learning

1. Introduction

Employee Suggestion Scheme (ESS) plays a pivotal role for organizations wishing to become more innovative (Buech at el., 2010). The employee ideas contribute to the achievement of high performance, excellence and competitive advantage in an organization (Rothberg, 2004). They create a win-win situation for employers and employees alike. The latest 2009 Annual Survey of IdeasUK highlighted the following benefits amongst their membership organizations such as Boots, HSBC and Dubai Aluminum.

- Cost savings of over $162m with the average implemented idea worth $2,263.00
- Return on Investment of at least 5:1.
- Employee involvement increased with average participation rates of 28%

In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the Dubai Aluminum company reports total number of implemented and awarded ideas to 116,139 since the Suggestion Scheme's inception about 30 years ago (www.dubal.ae). According to The audited saving's potential of the ideas implemented in 2012 amounted to $5.32 million which raised the total savings achieved by the Suggestion Scheme over the last 30 years to more than $31.8 million. Also, the overall employee participation rate reached the 100 percent mark for the sixth consecutive year. However, despite the many benefits of suggestion schemes, the sustainability of the suggestion scheme is still a challenge for organizations (Rapp & Eklund, 2007). Sustainability is an issue in other types of improvement programs as well (Bateman, 2005).

The employees' ideas and innovations are so important today in any organization because they are on the shop floor and are experiencing the advantages or disadvantages of what they are doing (Du Plessis et al., 2008). In all domains of society, progress depends on the adoption of new procedures or products. Such innovation necessarily starts with the generation of creative ideas (Rietzschel et al., 2010). So, the continuous streams of ideas are necessary as a fuel for innovation (Björklund, 2010). Moreover, the quality management will remain an essential part of developing and maintaining a competitive advantage

for organizations (Prajogo & Sohal, 2004). Thus, the future of the suggestion scheme is bright as a tool for fueling innovation. This paper presents framework to assess the sustainability of a suggestion system.

2. Background and Literature Review

2.1 The meaning and definition for 'Sustainability'

The meaning of 'sustainability' implies the ability to sustain and maintain a process or object at a desirable level of utility (Badiru, 2010). It means the ability to keep going, to keep up, to maintain, and to cause to continue in a certain state (Simpson & Weiner, 1989). Simply put, 'sustainability' of something means persistence in time of the thing, for example, if a building is left without maintenance, the aging of materials and the aggressions of environment will make the building enter a state where it cannot sustain itself and will collapse (Garrido, 2009). A sustainable system is one which survives or persists (Costanza & Patten, 1996). So, the term 'sustainability' implies the ability to continue in an unchanged manner (Aras & Crowther, 2010). In the literature, sustainability and sustainable development are used synonymously. Wikstr (2010) explains that sustainability from an organizational perspective is approached in two general ways; organization for sustainability, and sustainable business organization. Organization for sustainability implies use of environmentally friendly means of production and products together, with supporting, maintaining and developing social engagement. The sustainable business organization is mainly concerned with traditional business management. Labuschagne et al. (2005) explain sustainability from a business perspective and they defined business sustainability as "Adopting business strategies and activities that meet the needs of the enterprise and its stakeholders today while protecting, sustaining and enhancing the human and natural resources that will be needed in the future." Business sustainability seeks to create long-term shareholder value by embracing the opportunities and managing the risks that result from an organization's economic, environmental and social responsibilities (Pojasek, 2007).

Zairi & Liburd (2001, p.452) defined sustainability as "The ability of an organization to adapt to change in the business environment to capture contemporary best practice methods and to achieve and maintain superior competitive performance." The sustainability of change is defined as "The process through which new working methods, performance goals and improvement trajectories are maintained for a period appropriate to a given context" (Buchanan et al., 2005, p. 189). In the context of Total Quality Management (TQM), Dale et al. (1997a, p. 395) defined sustainability as "maintaining of a process of quality improvement."

Sustainability is dependent on multiple factors, at different levels of analysis: substantial, individual, managerial, financial, leadership, organizational, cultural, political, contextual and temporal (Bachnana et al., 2005). For the industry to become more sustainable, the responsibility of its activities should be expanded from the production site to the whole product chain (Jorgensen, 2008). Idris & Zairi (2006) explain the TQM sustainability could be viewed from the effectiveness of TQM implementation that is based on prescriptive critical factors and effectiveness of critical factors that generate sustainable excellence. Similarly, sustaining innovation within organizations involves several coordination challenges that center on how ideas can be translated across space and time (Bartel & Garud, 2009). The continuous improvement of industrial activities with respect to product sustainability also implies the cost and time efficiency, product and process quality and effectiveness (Ron, 1998). Sustaining business excellence means good governance, profitability, reputation and sustenance (Aras & Crowther, 2010).

Similarly, Presley & Meade (2010) explain the sustainability in construction industry as being more profitable and more competitive; delivering buildings and structures that provide greater satisfaction, well-being and value to customers and users; respecting and treating its stakeholders more fairly; enhancing and better protecting the natural environment; and minimizing its impact on the consumption of energy; reducing waste and avoiding pollution during the construction process. Thus, the concept of sustainability applies to all aspects of functional and operational requirements (Badiru, 2010).

2.2 Defining the Sustainability of Employee Suggestion Scheme

It is necessary to define the sustainability of a suggestion scheme to avoid it being perceived diversely. Rapp and Eklund (2007), for example, studied the suggestion schemes that were operational for longer periods of time and derived the enablers that helped to keep the program live over a period of time. Although, the longevity is one dimension, sustainability of a suggestion system needs to consider the achievement of the stated stakeholder goals. Some studies evaluate the effectiveness of their schemes in terms of number of suggestions received, and the number of suggestions implemented, but the sustainability assessment is not disclosed in only these parameters because it needs to be assessed through its key success factors. Suggestion schemes are designed to achieve a number of goals for the organizations.

Organizations should have stated goals for their suggestion scheme and the success of the suggestion scheme. Therefore, it should be assessed against achievement of these stated goals. Thus, sustainability of a suggestion system should be positioned to ensure that:

- It adds value to the organization through tangible or intangible benefits
- Creates a conducive work environment for improved productivity
- Ensures employee well-being and increases employee job satisfaction
- Improves employee morale and thus, continues to keep its employees involved in the suggestion schemes
- Improves employees confidence and builds sense of security among its employees
- Improves work process or service
- Improves customer satisfaction

Therefore, to achieve the sustainability, certain factors do play important roles (Hasim & Salman, 2010). For example, sustaining high performance culture in the organization implies incorporating the inhibitors that results in customer loyalty and business performance (Owen et al., 2001). During assessing the industry sustainability, generally the indicator based frameworks that addresses all three dimensions of sustainability, environmental, social, and economic indicators are used (Labuschagne, 2005). Indicator based frameworks have a wide focus as they can incorporate different dimensions. Rapp & Eklund (2007) explained the sustainable development of a suggestion system in terms of employee involvement. They found the following aspects contributed for the sustainability of the suggestion system:

- Situations when the employees had a personal benefit from submitting suggestions
- Campaigns emphasizing different themes encouraged employees to become more active within the suggestion system
- Employees having some of their suggestions rejected were more active in submitting suggestions than employees having most suggestions rejected or accepted

- A high monetary reward was not found favorable for submitting new suggestions, compared to lower rewards
- Increased support of group suggestions contributed to a sustained and high level of activity of the suggestion system

Aken et al. (2010) introduced a framework for the design and management of a Kaizen event program with four main phases: plan, implement, sustain and develop. Bateman (2005) argued that crucial to the development of the sustainability model of process improvement was the realization that sustainability is not a binary concept, with only two states of sustaining and not sustaining, but rather sustainability has a number of states. They proposed a four stages sustainability model: diagnostic, workshop, follow-up and post follow-up and ten enablers for sustaining the improvement activities. Curry& Kadasah (2002) presented an evaluation tool that can be used to assess the extent of progress of TQM based on key priority elements of TQM in which company's needed to focus. Pillet & Maire (2008) proposed a model of sustainability for an improvement process. This model is founded on three axes: organic state, return on effort and facilitation. They stated that to sustain an improvement process over time, it is necessary for these axes to be taken into account by managing their relative importance in space and over time and they proposed specific actions for each of the sates.

Daniel et al. (2004) proposed a framework that describes the factors that influence the sustainability of e-marketplaces. These factors operate at three inter-related levels:

- The macroeconomic and regulatory level
- The industry level
- The individual firm level

There are many others who identified the enablers for sustaining the improving activities (Readman and Bessant, 2007; Oxtoby et al., 2002; Pillet and Maire, 2008). Fadeeva (2005) stated that assessment of the networking should be done against the network's own objectives. A sustainable innovation should be proven to be of benefit to the diverse stakeholders (Johnson, 2004). So, the expectations from the system must be set in the language of those involved and should measure things on which they can have direct impact (Wood & Contracts, 2005). The TQM practices is evaluated by using parameters such as balance sheets, bottom lines, market shares, revenues and shareholder values. The dilemma is that the sustainability of TQM practices is not disclosed in these parameters (Svensson, 2006). Similarly, the mere outcomes such as quantity of suggestions received, quantity of suggestions implemented or just an increase in the bottom lines only cannot be considered as parameters to disclose sustainability.

The above discussions firstly hint that the 'sustainability' should first consider the performance perspective. Second, sustainability should also imply meeting the stated objectives of the initiative and it is not just a binary state of sustaining or not sustaining. Rather, it is influenced by a number of factors. Similarly, to assess the sustainability of a suggestion scheme, the key elements that focus on these perspectives need to be considered.

Lasrado et al. (2015) defined the sustainability of a suggestion scheme as "*The achievement of stakeholder's stated goals involving competence management, profitability, employee productivity and continuous process improvement now and in the future."*

Further, the variables emerging from the literature that foster suggestion scheme are: Top Management Support, Supervisor Encouragement, Coworker support, Organizational Encouragement, Support for innovation, Communication Evaluation, Awareness, Resources, Rewards, Training, Effective System, Feedback, Implementation of ideas, Empowerment, Job Factors, Expertise, Self Efficacy and Individual Characteristics, Teamwork, Employee Participation, Job Control, Organizational Impediments and the Competition, Employee confidence, Sense of security, Commitment and accountability, Improvement in process , Customer Satisfaction, Product quality, New Revenue, Cost saving, Employee Satisfaction(Lasrado et al., 2015) Also there are typical pitfalls noted in the literature which would impact suggestion schemes negatively. While the factors that prove to be barriers of suggestion system indeed have a negative impact on the sustainability of the suggestion scheme as we noted. These factors are: Organizational Impediments, Competition and Job Control. Summarily these indicators arising in the literature are tabulated in Table 1:

Table 1 : List of indicators

#	Indicators	Source
1	Coworker Support	Madjar, 2008; Majdar, 2005; Shalley & Gilson, 2004;
2	Commitment and Accountability	Carrier, 1998; Gorfin, 1969; Dickinson, 1932; Milner et al., 1995; Price, 2000
3	Communication and Networking	Alves et al., 2007; Aoki 2008;Arthur et al., 2010; Binnewies et al., 2007; Björklund, 2010; Klijn & Tomic, 2010; Kudisch, 2006;Madjar, 2008; Majdar,2005; Madjar, 2008; McConville, 1990;Ahmed, 2009; Recht
4	Competition	Bakker et al., 2006;
5	Cost Saving	Lloyd, 1996; Carrier,1998; Kanna, 2005; Leach et al.,
6	Customer Satisfaction	Arif et.al .2010; Marx, 2008; Gupta et al., 2005.
7	Effective System	Reuter, 1976;Lloyd, 1996 Arthur & Kim, 2005;Lloyd, 1999;Marx, 1995;McConville, 1990;Fairbank et al., 2003;Mishra, 1994;Prather & Turrell, 2002; Rapp and Eklund, 2007; Tatter, 1975; Van Dijk & Van Den Ende,
8	Employee Confidence	Bell, 1997; Islam, 2007; Lyold, 1996; Carrier, 1998;
9	Employee Participation	Alves et al., 2007; McConville, 1990; Lloyd, 1996; Fairbank and Williams, 2001; Cruz et al., 2009;
10	Empowerment	Recht & Wildero ,1998; Lipponen et al., 2008; Mclean, 2005; Powell, 2008; Axtell et al., 2000; Jong & Hartog
11	Evaluation	Egan, 2005; Rietzschel, 2008; Neagoe & Klein, 2009; Marx,1995; McConville, 1990; Ahmed ,2009; Powell, 2008; Tatter, 1975;Van & Ende, 2002; Hultgren, 2008;

12	Expertise	Bantel& Jackson, 1989; Björklund, 2010; Griffiths-hemans & Grover, 2006; Klijn & Tomic, 2010;
13	Feedback	Cho & Erdem, 2006 ; Bakker et al., 2006 ; Buech et al., 2010; Leach et al., 2006; Mishara, 1994; Powell, 2008; Rapp and Eklund, 2007;Arif et al., 2010; Hultgren,
14	Implementation of Suggestion	Marx, 1995; McConville, 1990; Hultgren, 2008; Lloyd, 1996; Cho & Erdem, 2007.
15	Improvement in Process	Arthur et. al., 2010 ; Marx, 2008; Janassen et al., 2004; Leach et al., 2006; Gorfin,1969;
16	Individual Attributes and Self Efficacy	Huang & Farh, 2009; Egan, 2005; Lipponen et al., 2008; Verworn, 2009; Frese et al., 1999; Axtell et al., 2000; Aoki, 2008;Binnewies et al., 2007; Björklund, 2010; Griffiths-hemans & Grover, 2006 ; Klijn & Tomic, 2010; Litchfield, 2008; Mclean, 2005; Wadhwa
17	Job Control	Anderson & Veilletten, 2008; Mclean, 2005; Sadi, 2008;Anderson & Veillette, 2008; Wong& Pang, 2003;
18	Job Factors	Amabile et al., 1996; Anderson & Veillette, 2008 ; Björklund, 2010; Buech et al., 2010; Griffiths-hemans & Grover, 2006; Hirst, 2009; Powell, 2008; Rego et al.,
19	New Revenue	Lloyd, 1996; Carrier ,1998; Kanna, 2005; Leach et al.,
20	Organizational Support	Fairbank and Williams, 2001;Alves et al., 2007; Ahmed, 1998; Alwis & Hartmann, 2008 Amabile et al., 1996; Arthur & Kim 2005; Björklund, 2010; Darragh-Jeromos, 2005; Ellonen et al., 2008; Griffiths-hemans & Grover, 2006; Janssen, 2004;Klijn & Tomic 2010; Kudisch, 2006; Neagoe & Klein, 2009; Mclean 2005;
21	Organizational Impediments	Stenmark, 2000; Alwis& Hartmann, 2008, Anderson, T.A. & Veillette, 2008; Wong & Pang, 2003; Toubia, 2006; Bakker et al., 2006; Amabile et al., 1996; Lyold,
22	Product Quality	Price, 2000; Ahmed, 2009; Islam ,2007; Arif et al., 2010
23	Publicity	Reuter, 1976; Mishara, 1994;Tatter,1975; Fairbank and Williams, 2001; Kudisch, 2006; Neagoe & Klein, 2009;
24	Resources	Alves et al., 2007; Amabile et al., 1996; Griffiths-hemans & Grover, 2006; Klijn & Tomic, 2010;

25	Rewards	Lloyd, 1996; Klijn & Tomic, 2010; Arthur & Kim, 2005; Arthur et al., 2010; Bartol & Srivastava, 2002; Darragh-Jeromos, 2005; Neagoe & Klein, 2009; Leach et al., 2006; Lloyd, 1999;Marx, 1995; McConville, 1990; Du plessis et al., 2008; Ahmed, 2009; Mishara, 1994; Rapp and Eklund, 2007; Rice, 2009; Shalley &
26	Sense of Security	Carrier, 1998; Gorfin, 1969; Dickinson, 1932; Milner et al., 1995; Price, 2000.
27	Supervisor Support	Mclean, 2005; Marx, 1995; Shalley & Gilson, 2004; Tatter 1975; Frese et al., 1999; Lloyd, 1996; Ohly et al., 2006; Arif et al., 2010; Hardin, 1964.
28	Support for Innovation	Lipponen et al., 2008; Hultgren, 2008; Scott & Bruce,
29	Teamwork	Rapp and Eklund, 2007; Amabile et al., 1996; Aoki, 2008; Carreir, 1998; Darragh-Jeromos, 2005; Mclean, 2005; McConville, 1990; Shalley & Gilson, 2004;
30	Top Management Support	Huang & Farh, 2009; Amabile et al., 2004; Carreir, 1998; Egan, 2005
31	Training	Paulus, 2008; Tatter, 1975; Baird & Wang, 2010; Stranne, 1964; Birdi, 2005
32	Employee Satisfaction	Bell, 1997; Islam, 2007; Lyold, 1996; Carrier 1998; Leach et. al., 2006;Janassen,2004

Source: Lasrado et al, (2015)

3. Methodology

In order to assess the sustainability of employee suggestion schemes, the initial framework described in Appendix A as applied to three case-studies in the UAE. A case study is defined as a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular phenomenon within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon being studied and the context within which it is being studied are not clearly evident (Yin, 2003). This method of study is especially useful for trying to test/validate theoretical models by using them in real world/ situations, and testing whether scientific theories and models actually work in real life. The semi structured interview method was used to collect the data. The purpose of doing the interview is to get a wider picture and more detailed information about the practices existing in the organizations. For the purpose of this study three organizations using suggestion schemes relatively for 5 years to 30 years were used. We will represent these s as A, B, and C. The interviews took place in each employee's office. Although, there were no time constraints, it took between 45 minutes and one hour to complete the interviews. Each participant was apprised of the relevance of the study and the assessment. This was done in order for the respondents to put their thoughts in the context of the model.

The questions were not asked in a specific order, flexibility was given to people, to talk without much restriction of rigid question order or check lists. This flexibility gave the chance for people to explain in detail, the system they have in their companies. An email request was sent to the suggestion system managers to obtain their consent for the participation in the research study. There was a deliberate attempt not to put any pressure on them concerning the interview arrangements; hence, the interviews were conducted at a date, time and venue convenient and suitable for them. The participants were contacted by email and an agreed date, time and the venue was set for the interview sessions. Arranged dates and times were confirmed with the participants' personal secretaries by telephone a couple days prior to the interview dates. The telephone contacts with the senior managers created a friendly atmosphere between the researcher and the participants and contributed significantly to the success of the interview sessions and the case study field procedures

The researcher conducted an open-ended interview with key members of each organization using a case study protocol guide during the interview process so that uniformity and consistency can be assured in the data, which could include facts, opinions, and unexpected insights. All in-depth interviews were conducted over a period of two months. The responses to each of the above questions were written down. At the end of the interview, the researcher thanked the interview was thanked the participants for their participation and was informed that they would be sent the interview report if they wanted to add or delete any information. The researcher also considered multiple sources of data for this study gathering and studying of organizational documents such as administrative reports, user manuals minutes, and news clippings for each of the organizations.

Content analysis is a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding. It is useful for examining trends and patterns in documents. A deductive content analysis method was used to analyse the interview transcripts. This approach is used when the structure of analysis is operationalized on the basis of previous knowledge. A categorization matrix that involves each factor of the sustainability model was developed. The interview transcripts were then reviewed for content and coded for correspondence with sustainability factors. After a categorization matrix has been developed, all the data are reviewed for content and coded for correspondence with or exemplification of the identified categories.

4. The results

The initial framework conceptualized above was applied to three cases identified as Organization A, Organization B and Organization C. These are detailed in Appendix B. The findings across this organization are consistently demonstrating good evidence for the leadership and organizational encouragement. Top management of the organization consistently participates in honouring the suggestions and moreover sets examples by participating directly in making suggestion as uniquely noted in the Organization B. The supervisor to the suggestion is also consistent across all three organizations. They display different form of support to encourage the suggestion schemes. A supportive culture is further noted. Free flow of communication, Open Door Policy and networking are other forms of supports noted. Thus, the minimum evidences, to look for in the assessment include:

- Examples of top management Support, supervisor and co-workers as noted in the chapter

- Free flow of information, networking and collaborating

Good evidence and support is also demonstrated for system capability across all three organizations. Moreover, they are fairly consistent among all three organizations. Although the rewards are designed uniquely, all three organizations demonstrated good reward scheme. Similarly, the robust evaluation process too is visible in the organization. In all three organizations employees, receive feedback and they have easy to use systems. Although the system features differ among the organizations while one provides variety of ways to make suggestions, others provide good guidelines to use the suggestion system. Awards are further given only when suggestions are implemented. The necessary and common evidences to look for in the assessment of this factor thus are:

- Evidence on implemented suggestions.
- Job autonomy
- Encouraging feedback
- Financial rewards
- An evaluation criteria
- Awareness of the scheme
- User friendly system

The third factor is the organizational encouragement is also well demonstrated within the all cases. Firstly, all three organizations recognize the importance of team work and facilitate the team suggestions. All employees are eligible to participate in the suggestion scheme. The evidences analysed from these cases to demonstrate the organizational encouragement are:

- Provision to submit ideas in teams
- Team rewards
- Organization has talented employees
- Trainings to use suggestion system
- Making the scheme open to all to participate

All three organizations demonstrated that their suggestion scheme has an impact on customer satisfaction, product quality, process improvement, and profitability and employee productivity. The possible outcome indicators as analyzed from three cases thus should evidence the following:

- Evidence of commitment to customer satisfaction
- Product quality
- Process improvements
- There are new revenue generated
- There is cost saving
- Employees feel safe and sense of accountability are satisfied with their job
- Employees demonstrate sense of accountability and commitment to organizations
- There is improvement in Employee participation Rate
- System objectives are set to improve the productivity
- Suggestions aimed at morale improvements are have a reward scheme

In all three organizations, employees have freedom to perform their tasks and make their suggestions as per their own will. The assessment of this factor should thus look for evidences or practices such as:

- Flexibility in working environment
- Innovation supportive practices
- No standard routines
- Suggestion making is not mandatory and not established as competition in the organization

The varied practices noted across the organizations

The commitment and involvements of leadership is exhibited in a number of formats. At an initial stage this commitment and form of support is not very visible but it is gradually developed. On the other hand, there might be some adverse actions that can hinder the success of the suggestion system. For example, suggestion system is implemented in isolation and employees are not at all motivated to participate. The supervisor support is crucial for the success of the suggestion system. Supervisor's guidance and encouragement is the basic requirement for the success of the suggestion scheme. To develop this support it is then necessary that organizations formalize this facilitation by making the supervisors responsible for the success of the suggestions system and this could be further moved to its advance level by empowering and recognizing them too on awarded suggestions. At the same, time supervisor support could be undermined if the organization does not recognize the role of the supervisor in the success of the suggestion system. At an initial stage, organizations provide guidance on type of suggestions and how to make the suggestion. They develop centralize or decentralized systems to review the ideas. Organizations move beyond their initial stage to developmental stage to create a supportive organization culture. At an advanced level, they organize creativity simulation workshops and options to replicate the ideas across the organizations and develop central repositories. Organizations can hinder the creative ability of employees and success of the suggestion system may be able to be put in danger if the organizations basic culture is not innovation supportive. For example, the rigid rules and organizational structured, fostering a pressurized work environment can have negative impacts. The table below shows how the organization support takes shape from its initial to advanced status.

Organizations encourage open communication and provide opportunities to meet and share ideas through formal or informal meetings. This facilitation is further developed by strengthening the communications through usage of in-house newsletters or websites and avoiding the barriers for communication among the departments. Organizations further create opportunities for networking with external and internal parties for sharing ideas and stimulating creativity. Employees need to be protected from coworkers' disruptive behaviors. Organizations provide support to resolve disputes arising as a result of suggestions. If employees are to sort the disputes on their own it would have a negative impact on the suggestion system. Organizations demonstrate that the comfort and guidance of workers motivates employees to make suggestions. But of course, such a support is visible in organizations who demonstrate long standing of the suggestion system, and where advanced facilities such as options to submit suggestions for colleagues are given. The practices that instill negative impact here is the employees hinder the success by simply not supporting the colleague's initiative. The success of the suggestion system depends on evaluating and implementing the valid suggestions. Organizations should demonstrate that it implements the suggestions. The implementation rate should gradually improve. The advanced organizations further ensure that they award only implemented suggestions. The performance status report is shared among all stakeholders.

Organizations may sometimes invite the ideas and not implement them at all. The managers take the ideas of their subordinates and act as if it is of their own giving a feeling of free-ride. The table below exhibits the practices for implementation of suggestion from its initial to advanced stages.

It is necessary that employees to be given job autonomy to exhibit their creativity ability. Organizations further demonstrate they value their employees and encourage participation by giving an opportunity to take part in decision making. Tight work routines pressurized work environments hinder the creativity greatly. Feedback is one of the most important components of the suggestion systems. Organizations therefore set deadlines for processing the suggestions. It is not only sufficient to process the suggestions within the deadlines but feedback needs to be supportive and cooperative. Organizations therefore ensure that system is organized to make sure the encouraging feedback is given. On the other hand, organizations may provide discoursing feedback and demotivate employees. Rewards are key components of suggestion schemes. Organizations therefore set up financial benefits or some recognition mechanism. Organizations at a developmental stage ensure that there is transparent process of rewards and recognition. At an initial stage, it is necessary that effective evaluation process is in place to assess the suggestions. Organizations depending only on teams or managers to validate the ideas may have adverse impact. Evaluation could be developed by making this process transparent to employees or create more awareness of the evaluation process and upon completion of the evaluation process; employees should give a fair chance to appeal if needed. At an advanced stage, organizations even provide feedback on rejected suggestions. Organizations create awareness of their scheme using common communication mechanism. At a developmental stage, the campaigns are more focused and use advanced mechanisms for promotions.

Organizations will have a system to receive employee's ideas and process them on time. This is improved by making implementing electronic and user friendly system. Established organizations then install dedicated administrators and central systems and develop clear roles and responsibilities. Organizations then set side financial resources to support the suggestion system. They build mechanism to distribute resources support to stimulate employee creativity.

Customer Satisfaction would be evidenced in the established schemes, and if there is no evidence of this benefit the scheme is at initial stage. The improvement in product quality would be evidenced in the established schemes, and if there is no evidence of this benefit the scheme is at an initial stage. The improvement in processes would be evidenced in the established schemes, and if there is no evidence of this benefit the scheme is at an initial stage. Moreover, the objectives of the scheme would be to elicit suggestions for improving the processes. The established suggestion systems exhibit good savings as a result of suggestion scheme. If there is no evidence of this benefit the scheme is at initial stage. In an established scheme, suggestions aimed at employee morale and resulting in employee productivity would reward with an appropriate reward scheme. Employees would feel safe, satisfied with their jobs. Their confidence on organizations would be improved. Thus they would result in making more suggestions. For the success of the suggestion systems, it is necessary that there are no barriers to creativity and as such employees are free to carry out their tasks and employees don't work under pressure at all times. Greater the support form organizations on these parameters, better is the result of the suggestion system.

Teamwork is encouraged and team rewards are offered in established schemes. Employee domain knowledge and experience is also instrumental in the success of the suggestion system. Organizations demonstrate that due to their talented employees, their systems are successful. They also note that, over

periods, it is skilled employees who make more suggestions and established scheme attract reward at local or international levels.

Organizations support their employees through trainings relating to suggestion system usage but the established organizations further establish creativity stimulating trainings, whereas trainings are not very common initially. Established schemes ensure that they receive suggestions relating to any improvement and not necessarily relating to saving costs. Established schemes also demonstrate that they participate at local and international competitions and moreover, they do not draw a strict line between the job description and creativity. At a developmental level, scheme would be made open to all and status of employee participation is made public. Organizations also limit the participations to certain employees and this would keep the sustainability of a suggestion system low. The variations of employee participations are tabulated as below.

Competition is a major barrier for the success of the suggestion system. The existence of such a practice brings the sustainability of suggestion system very low. Established organizations therefore ensure that employees participate at their own will and make it clear to its employees that they are not judged for their performance. This may not be well stated at initial stages.

Thus the results also showed that these practices varied across the organizations demonstrating an initial state to an advanced stage. The analysis of three cases also yield that sustainability is not just a binary stage of ‘sustaining’ or ‘not sustaining’. The sustainability factors and indictors demonstrate varied influence on a suggestion system. These influences vary from initial state to advanced stage. Therefore, sustainability is conceptualized to have status from an initial state to the advanced stage. The initial stage means that there is no or very little evidence for demonstration of the existence of practices associated with that indicator. At this stage it is also possible that each indicator exhibits adverse practices. The developmental stage demonstrates that there is adequate evidence of the existence of supporting practices; however, these could be further developed for improvements. The advance stage implies that are various good practices in the organization to demonstrate the influence of the indicators on the suggestion system.

The case analysis thus, helped to conceptualize a sustainability excellence Framework as shown in Figure 1 below.

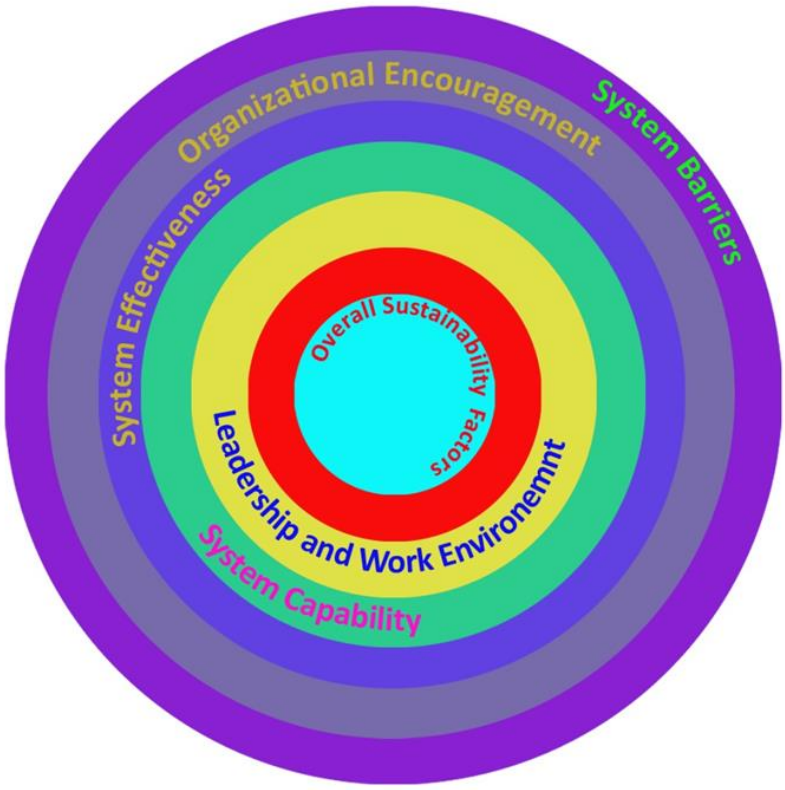

Figure 1 : ESS sustainability Excellence Model

5. Organizational Learning and Its implications in relation to suggestion schemes

Senge (2006) describes organizational learning as where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together. Given the challenge of globalization and the pace of change accelerating, the need to develop mechanisms for continuous learning and innovation are continuously growing. So, the organizational learning and continuous improvement have attracted a great deal of research and managerial interest in recent years (Locke & Jain, 1995). The linkages are also fairly reported and conclusions like "Learning organizations and CI are mutually dependent "are also apparent. Following on this one of the implication is that managers that are involved in TQM do not need a new mindset or paradigm called "learning organization"(Terziovski et al 2000). Organizations need to recognize that their continuous improvement activities as part of the TQM philosophy have created their "learning organization" (Sohal & Morrison,1995). Total quality management tends to create the environment necessary for organizational learning to occur (Sohal & Morrison,1995).

The sustainability factors of suggestion schemes are linked to organizational learning. The five major indicators identified in this research clearly support the concept of organizational learning. Suggestion schemes are vehicles to foster the Organizational Learning initiatives. The sustainability factors therefore need to be nurtured to foster the organizational learning. Sustainability of suggestion schemes is not a binary state of 'yes or 'no' rather it depends on the impact of each of the factors.

6. Conclusion

The objective of this paper was to propose a sustainability assessment model and to discuss the implications for organizational learning. Then, it presented a sustainability excellence model comprising of three stages and discussed the good practices for sustaining the suggestion scheme. The major sustainability assessment factors emerged from this research are:

1. Leadership and Work Environment
2. System Capability
3. Organizational Encouragement
4. System Effectiveness
5. System Barriers

It is then evident that the emerging factors establish a link to organizational learning as each of the factors represents Learning Organizations characteristics. It implies that Suggestion scheme could also pay a way for organizational learning like any other improvement programs such as TQM. This study has brought out a unique linkage between suggestion scheme program and organizational learning. It has also established a scope for future research on analyzing the impact of suggestion schemes on organizational learning. The suggestion schemes as we already note are mechanisms for organizational excellence, they indeed underpin the organizational learning.

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APPENDIX A

Leadership and Organizational Environment	**System Capability**	**System Effectiveness**	**Organizational Encouragement**	**System Barriers**
Factor Indicators				
Top Management Support What evidence is available to demonstrate the top management support?	Support for Suggestion Implementation Demonstrate the actualization of the suggestion in your organization?	Profitability Does your suggestion system generate new revenue or saves cost?	Teamwork How would you describe the team work in relation to suggestion systems?	Job Control Describe the job environment in your organization?
Supervisory support What evidence is available to demonstrate the supervisor support to suggestion system?	System Features Describe the suggestion system features?	Employee Productivity Describe how the employee productivity is improved as a result of the suggestion system?	Training Explain the training programs that you offer to your employees in relation to suggestion systems	Competition Do your employees sense the suggestion system as a competition to test their ability in any way?
Coworker support How do you describe the work relationships among the employees in	Awareness How your organization creates awareness of the suggestion system?	Product quality Does the suggestion system impact the quality of the product? Give evidence	Expertise How do you describe the employee expertise in your organization?	

relation to suggestion systems?				
Organizational support What evidence is available to demonstrate the Organizational support to the suggestion system?	Feedback Explain he feedback process in your organization	Process improvements Does the suggestion system trigger improvements in the processes? Give Examples	Employee Participation What evidence is available to demonstrate the Employee Participation in the suggestion system	
Communication Explain how communications and networking impacts suggestion system in your organization	Rewarding Explain the reward scheme for suggestion system in your organization	Customer Satisfaction Does the suggestion system impacts the customer satisfaction? Give Examples		
Support for Innovation What mechanism exist in your organization to protect your employees in case of disputes due to suggestion system	Evaluation Explain the evaluation procedure for suggestion system in your organization			

	Resources Explain the resource availability suggestion system in your organization			

Appendix B – Set of Organizational Practices across the three organizations

Leadership and Top Management

Directly involving in programs for awarding the best suggestions	✓	✓	✓
Review Suggestion system performance report monthly	✓	✓	✓
Give direction to departments that fall below the expected outcomes	✓		
Vision and mission for their suggestion system	✓	✓	✓
Establishing an "audit system" for suggestion system		✓	
Host and sponsor events relating to the creativity	✓	✓	✓
		✓	
Directly involving in making the suggestions related to their work area and thus by setting examples to their subordinates.		✓	✓
They sponsor and participate in the conferences and events to show their support for their suggestion schemes	✓	✓	
Supports and empowers middle management	✓	✓	
Supervisor is responsible for reviewing employee ideas and providing suggestions with input and assistance in refining the ideas.	✓		
Supervisor has been given full support and taken into confidence	✓		
Supervisors are empowered to fix the award for the suggestion received	✓		
Supervisors are given Targets	✓	✓	
Supervisor encourages their team members to discuss any of their work related issue prior to forming into a suggestion into the system.	✓	✓	✓
Supervisors provide their guidance if required to formulate the solution as well.	✓	✓	✓
Supervisors too receive monthly and quarterly suggestion reports.		✓	✓
Sharing information regarding the suggestion scheme on in-house monthly newsletter	✓	✓	✓
Encouraging staff to participate at national and international level conferences	✓	✓	✓
Flexible organizational structure and non-rigid rules	✓	✓	✓
Active website detailing about the status of the suggestion scheme regularly.	✓	✓	✓
Employees are encouraged to submit their ideas at local and international competitions.	✓	✓	✓
Open Door Policy and opens communication channels with them and increases the transparency of administrative decisions.	✓	✓	✓
Meetings and opportunities to meet with Colleagues	✓	✓	✓
Provision to dissolve any disputes among employees	✓	✓	✓
Provision to discuss the idea with immediate line manger prior to submission	✓	✓	✓
Demonstrate of open and supportive culture		✓	✓
Employees are protected and supported by the HR department to forward their creativity fearlessly.	✓	✓	✓
Provision to collaborate with co-workers	✓	✓	✓

System Capability

Awarding only implemented suggestions	✓	✓	✓
Evidence is available on implemented suggestions.	✓	✓	✓
Monitoring the system performance with regard to suggestion Implementation	✓	✓	✓
Distributing the suggestion system performance report among all stakeholders		✓	✓
Provide encouraging feedback	✓	✓	✓
Setting up reminders to evaluators and implementers on pending suggestions	✓	✓	✓

Setting up realistic deadlines for processing the suggestions	✓	✓	✓
Provision to submit the suggestion to central administrator if needed	✓		
Financial Rewards	✓	✓	✓
Dedicated Evaluation Team	✓	✓	✓
Providing reasons for rejected suggestion	✓	✓	✓
Making the evaluation procedures and team members transparent	✓	✓	✓
An Evaluation Criteria	✓	✓	✓
At least a chance to appeal the decision		✓	
Promotional Events	✓	✓	✓
Newsletters/websites	✓	✓	✓
Information through bulletin boards and roll ups	✓	✓	✓
Employee Induction Program	✓		✓
Has a Brand Name	✓	✓	✓
Dedicated suggestion scheme administrator	✓	✓	✓
A electronic system to receive and timely process the suggestion.	✓	✓	✓
Multiple ways to submit suggestions		✓	✓
Availability of Financial resources	✓	✓	✓
Procedure to seek resource support	✓	✓	✓
Are allowed to escalate any related matters to their superiors and superiors in turn take it to higher management for a swift action		✓	✓
Organizational Encouragement		□	□
Provision to submit ideas in teams	✓	✓	✓
Team Rewards	✓	✓	✓
Suggestions get awarded at local or international competitions	✓	✓	✓
Organization has talented employees	✓	✓	✓
Experienced or high skilled workers make more suggestions when compared to others	✓	✓	✓
Creativity Related Workshops and trainings	✓	✓	✓
Trainings to use suggestion system	✓	✓	✓
Making the scheme open to all for participation	✓	✓	✓
Evidence available to demonstrate the participation	✓	✓	✓
Organization or Employees win awards for their suggestions	✓	✓	✓
Setting Participation Targets eg (min suggestions per year)		✓	
Encourages suggestion for any area and not necessarily for cost savings	✓	✓	✓

System Effectiveness			
Provision for customer suggestion	✓	✓	✓
Evidence of commitment to customer satisfaction	✓	✓	✓
Evidence available for commitment to enhance product quality	✓	✓	✓
Evidence available to demonstrate process improvement	✓	✓	✓
Evidence of New Revenues	✓	✓	✓
Evidence of Cost Savings	✓	✓	✓
Employees feel safe and sense of accountability are satisfied with their job	✓	✓	✓
Employees demonstrate sense of accountability and commitment to organizations	✓	✓	✓
There is improvement in Employee participation Rate	✓	✓	✓
System objectives are set to improve the productivity	✓	✓	✓
Suggestions aimed at morale improvements are have a reward scheme	✓	✓	✓
System Barriers			
Flexibility in working environment	✓	✓	✓
Innovation supportive practices	✓	✓	✓
No standard routines	✓	✓	✓
Employees have job autonomy	✓	✓	✓
Suggestion making is not mandatory and not established as competition	✓	✓	✓